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ABSTRACT

Many university and college counseling centers are experiencing increased financial constraints and a growing lack of general institutional support. This paper suggests that psycho-educational programming may be one solution for reaching more students while spending less in financial and staff hour resources. Although educational programming may be an excellent solution in theory, the actual provision of such programming presents its own difficulties. Discussed here are psycho-educational programs that have been developed in order to proactively reach greater numbers of students and do so with fewer expenses. This program is presented as a vehicle for addressing the issues of how to market counseling center services. Outlined here are the program itself, the marketing model, and the marketing plan. It is suggested that psycho-educational programming and proactive and assertive marketing are effective and ethical responses to meeting the demand of increased services with decreased resources. While some critics claim that marketing detracts from the clinical mission of the counseling center, it is argued that experience with such methods shows that this is not the case. Contains 12 references. (RJM)

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Have Less? Do More!

Marketing University Counseling Center Services

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Abstract

University and college counseling centers are facing a quagmire of dilemmas characterized by decreasing resources and increasing demands for services. It is suggested that psycho-educational programming may be one solution for reaching more students while spending less in financial and staff hour resources. This presentation will discuss an example of a creative, innovative, effective, and economical psycho-educational program developed in order to proactively reach greater numbers of students and do so with few expenses. This psycho-educational program will then be discussed as a vehicle for addressing the issues of marketing counseling center services. Finally, it will be suggested that psycho-educational programming and proactive and assertive marketing are effective and ethical responses to meeting the demand of increased services with decreased resources while still effectively carrying out the mission of a university or college counseling center.

INTRODUCTION

Many university and college counseling centers are experiencing greater and greater financial constraint and a growing lack of general institutional support (Loeb, 1994; Bishop. 1991; Quintana, Kilmartin, Yesenosky, and Macias, 1991; Berger, 1983). Ironically, however, there is often the expectation that these same centers will continue to reach more and more students and provide increased levels of service. In effect, university and college counseling centers are having to offer increased services with less resources and are being asked to do so in a manner that is evolving in its appeal to student populations which are becoming characterized by their need for services to be interesting in a "MTV, soundbite, easy-to-swallow, mass appeal" manner.

The elements of a working formula for university and college counseling centers appears to be this: fewer resources, greater service output, more student contacts, more creative, less institutional support, and so on and so on. It is enough to make for near madness in any counseling center! Where then is a counseling center to turn? Educational programming has often been suggested as being one practical solution to this quagmire of dilemmas. Typically, university and college counseling centers have adhered to a model of providing direct clinical services one-on-one which may provide the most intense level of service but may no longer be most practical in ever shrinking university and college economies. As one solution, proactive and wellness oriented educational programming may become a better and better tool as a supplement or addition to one-to-one service (Quintana et al., 1991). Educational programming may also become a better and better tool for responding to many of the aforementioned changes and challenges while still continuing to keep up with the mission of many university and college counseling centers, that being student wellness and development (Dworkin and Lyddon, 1991).

Although educational programming may be an excellent solution in theory, the actual provision of educational programming unfortunately presents its own set of complications. Providing educational programming on university and college campuses to promote student wellness and development often puts programmers between the proverbial *rock and a hard place*. This rock and hard place is between: a) needing to provide creative, innovative, effective, and economical educational programming and b) getting target populations to attend them (Trice, Desio, and Haire, 1989).

As a solution to many of these aforementioned dilemmas, this current presentation will discuss one such creative, innovative, effective, and economical educational program developed in order to proactively and creatively reach greater numbers of students from all strata of one particular university campus and do so with few expenses. This educational program will then be discussed as a vehicle for addressing the issues of proactive marketing and the need for university and college counseling centers to engage in educational programming in order to generate greater access and use of center services.

THE PROGRAM

The program to be discussed is a program developed at Auburn University by the Staff of the Personal Assessment/Counseling Services (PACS). The program is based on an idea first created at the University of Iowa Counseling Center. The program is called the *THURSDAYS @ THREE Psycho-Educational Workshop Series* (The Series). The Series provided one hour workshops once a week for 18 weeks, on 18 different topics of psychological importance, and was open to all students, staff, and faculty (See Appendix I). The topics that were covered ranged from eating disorders to stress management to gay, lesbian, and bisexual concerns. The Series was created

to address comprehensive issues of psychological importance so as to provide information at the primary level of intervention of promoting wellness rather than only and more traditionally treating pathology recidivistically. It was also done to make important initial contacts for providing direct psychological services to students who would not self-refer to the counseling center otherwise. This provided the secondary level of intervention of making contact with students who would not come for counseling services until their issues became worse or were eventually referred by someone else within the university because their behavior had become disruptive.

THE MARKETING MODEL

The THURSDAYS @ THREE Series was designed with specific attention paid to marketability. If the program was going to provide more service to more individuals, attention had to be paid to making The Series as accessible and attractive as possible to the primary target audience: students. With this in mind, a model for marketability was created (Elam and Paley, 1992). This model included the following elements: a) choosing a wide breadth of topic areas to appeal to as many areas of interest and concern as possible; b) choosing topics which also had a high salience to the typical presenting concerns of students to a university or college counseling center (Carney, Peterson, and Moberg, 1990; Hoffman and Weiss, 1986); c) picking a central, highly accessible, and neutral location for the series, such as the student union building; d) imbuing into The Series relative anonymity for participants by not collecting names nor asking participants why they were attending; e) creating constancy and consistency by having each of the 18 workshops on the same day of the week at the same time of day for 18 consecutive weeks and making the time and day of The Series its title; f) instilling spontaneity and flexibility by not requiring pre-registration and encouraging any interested parties to attend any or all workshops as they were able

to; and g) not charging an admission fee so as to comfortably fit the typical student budget.

With The Series designed to be highly marketable, the next task was actually promulgating The Series. With university and college counseling centers needing to increase their activities within constrained resources, a proactive assertive, and economical marketing plan was also developed to assure that the information about The Series was widely disseminated at very little or no cost at all. Within the university or college environment are various popular venues to pursue inexpensive and free marketing. As examples, universities and colleges have free intra-campus postal services, free electronic communication systems, free advertisement via campus media, free advertisements via campus activities offices, and coalition building with other student personnel offices in efforts to co-sponsor programs. Lastly, universities and colleges typically supply free meeting spaces as well as free audio-visual equipment so that many of the typical costly presentation expenses need not be costs for counseling centers.

THE MARKETING PLAN

The final step was developing a marketing plan which was based on a *marketing mix* specific to the university and college campus community (Wittmann, 1988; Gilchrist and Stringer, 1992). The marketing mix included a specific mixture of advertising and information distribution contacts within major areas of the campus (e.g. student services/life/activities, academics, and university media) and among multifarious levels of campus life (e.g. students, staff, faculty, and administration). The final component of the marketing mix was incorporating the elements of the marketing model into all publicity contacts. What follows is a comprehensive plan which is

detailed by the specific actions which can be taken as a part of this marketing plan as well as the rationales for each of these actions:

STUDENT SERVICES/LIFE/ACTIVITIES

Student Services

- **(A)**CTIONS
  - Co-sponsor individual Workshops with other student personnel offices.
  - Mail weekly Workshop announcements to student personnel offices and staffs.
  - Distribute weekly announcements in-house.
  - Encourage in-house referrals to Workshops.

- **(R)**ATIONALES
  - Coordinates programming activities of various student personnel offices.
  - Fosters multi-office programming coalitions.
  - Multiplies marketing resources.
  - Gives Series information directly to referral sources.
  - Creates more comprehensive service provision to already established clienteles.

Student Life

- **(A)**
  - Conduct Series preview day for residence hall staff.
  - Distribute weekly Workshop announcements to residence hall staffs.
  - Coordinate with Greek system to offer activity credits to members for attending.

- **(R)**
  - Creates awareness for residence hall staffs of entire Series.
  - Encourages residence hall staffs to post and distribute weekly Workshop announcements.
  - Generates invitations to do Workshops in residence halls.
  - Connects with Greek system to encourage members to attend.

Student Activities

- **(A)**
  - List Series information with student activities offices' promotional networks, e.g. events calendars, kiosks, bulletin boards, advertising windows, and so on.
  - Distribute weekly Workshop announcements to student organizations.

- **(R)**
  - Creates greater campus wide awareness of Series.
  - Creates affiliation with in-place student events networks.

Targets specific Workshops to specific groups (i.e program on body image to women's and athletic's organizations)

STAFF/FACULTY/ADMINISTRATION

- **(A)** Offer Series through continuing education/human resource development class listings.
  Fax weekly Workshop announcement to all academic personnel.

- **(R)** Opens up Series to broader audience.

ACADEMICS

- **(A)** Mail weekly Workshop announcements to academic departments for posting and distribution.
  Mail Series information to departments for inclusion in department newsletters.
  Coordinate with teaching faculty and staff to offer credit to students for attending Workshops.

- **(R)** Creates connection with academia for greater campus wide awareness of Series.
  Creates venue for instructors to offer new and creative educational opportunities to students.

MEDIA

- **(A)** List Workshops in all campus weekly/daily publications, i.e. ongoing events calendar.
  Coordinate with campus publications to run feature stories on Series.
  List Workshops on electronic billboards.
  Conduct weekly internet distribution to all campus addresses.
  Coordinate with campus radio/television stations to release weekly public service announcements.
  Distribute announcements of upcoming Workshops to Workshop attendees.

- **(R)** Makes use of in-place, free, and highly accessed advertising venues.
  Connects with growing computer and electronic venues.
  Encourages "word-of-mouth" promotion.

RESULTS

Using this type of programming series as well as the aforementioned marketing model and plan, the counseling center achieved remarkable results. The Series was originally designed to accommodate for 180 people as being the projected total across all 18 Workshops of The Series. The actual number of attendees to The Series was over 600. Costs for The Series were for the price of paper and other materials for the Workshops and for marketing activities. The total cost was under $100.00 which is .16¢ a participant not including the minimal amount of staff time to plan, market, and present The Series.

In regards to actual service delivery, the number of direct service hours during the academic quarters in which The Series took place increased by 22% from the same period during the previous year and a 15% increase from the year before that. Direct correlation between the increase of service and The Series are difficult to perfectly calculate, but the counseling center did experience a number of students presenting for direct services stating that they had heard about the counseling center or decided to finally come to the counseling center as a result of The Series. The number reporting The Series as their referral source for direct services was in proportion to the increase in direct service hours for that time period.

The largest sources of referrals to The Series as listed on The Series evaluations were, in descending order of representation: classroom extra-credit notices, university publications, events calendars, residence hall postings, and word-of-mouth. This last source of referral was especially important as it signaled that The Series was interesting and relevant enough to students' experiences for them to tell others about The Series. Furthermore, Series evaluations indicated that individuals were also attending more than one Workshop which was further welcomed positive feedback. As a last endorsement to the popularity and utility of The Series, a Summer version of The Series was requested by various academic departments and the

campus residence hall association requested that The Series be run next year concurrently in its present location and then in a second location within the residence halls.

A number of ethical questions have been raised concerning the active marketing of campus counseling services (Stadler, 1988). Pundits have stated that putting attention and energy into marketing is perhaps diverting away from the clinical mission of the counseling center and as perhaps compromising the quality of the actual clinical services. It is clear, however, from the total attendance numbers, the referral sources, the high quality of the Workshops as noted by Series evaluations, and the increase in demand for direct services as a result of The Series that the integrity of the services offered by university or college counseling centers does not have to compromised by using educational programming nor does it have to compromised by a proactive and assertive marketing approach.

University and college counseling centers on today's campus face a difficult job as they quite often are the first *whipping posts* for universities and colleges when administrators are deciding where to make financial sacrifices (P. Barnes, personal communication, August 2, 1995). This tough job is further complicated by these same administrators simultaneously asking university and college counseling centers to justify themselves by providing more services to more students and then to do so with less resources. It is strongly suggested that educational programming and proactive and assertive marketing are extremely effective manners in which to respond to both of these demands and still effectively carry on with the clinical mission of the university and college counseling center.

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